DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 301 532 SO 019 765

AUTHOR Patrick, John J.
TITLE High School Government Textbooks. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, Bloomington, IN.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-SO-88-12
PUB DATE Dec 88
CONTRACT RI88062009
NOTE 4p.
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, 2805 East Tenth Street, Suite 120, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47408.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *High Schools; Social Studies; Textbook Content; *Textbook Evaluation; *Textbooks; Textbook Standards; *United States Government (Course)
IDENTIFIERS *ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

Textbooks may indicate the quantity and quality of subject content in a secondary school curriculum. They tend to conform to state departments of education and large local school districts' curriculum guides and to be the dominant instructional medium in high school courses. Examinations of widely-used textbooks may indicate the strengths and weaknesses in these high school classes. This ERIC Digest investigates government textbooks in terms of (1) distinctive characteristics; (2) major weaknesses; (3) criticisms of textbook treatments of the U.S. Constitution; and (4) recommendations for textbook improvements. Publishers produce government textbooks that conform to national curriculum patterns, that are similar in content, style, and format, that are designed for passive learning, and that tend to be visually appealing. Major weaknesses include: (1) superficial and simplistic coverage of material; (2) abstract or lifeless treatment of ideas and events; (3) idealistic and unrealistic presentations of society; (4) fragmentation of subject matter; (5) avoidance of controversial topics; and (6) emphasis on low-level cognition. Recommendations for improving these textbooks include the need to: (1) emphasize the concepts and values of U.S. constitutional democracy; (2) highlight critical issues of constitutional democracy; (3) utilize case studies; and (4) develop critical thinking and decision-making skills. Ten references and ERIC resources are included. (JHP)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED301532

HIGH SCHOOL GOVERNMENT TEXTBOOKS

by

JOHN J. PATRICK

ERIC Digest EDO-SO-88-12

December 1988

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
SOCIAL STUDIES DEVELOPMENT CENTER
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

SO 019 765

ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/
Social Science Education
2805 East Tenth Street, Suite 120
Indiana University
Bloomington, Indiana 47408

ERIC®

Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education
2805 East Tenth Street, Suite 120
Indiana University
Bloomington, Indiana 47405 (812) 335-3838

ERIC Digest EDO-SO-88-12 December 1988

High School Government Textbooks

by John J. Patrick

Textbooks are important indicators of the quantity and quality of content in the secondary school curriculum. They tend to conform to curriculum guides of state-level departments of education and large local school districts. And they tend to be the dominant instructional medium in high school classrooms. Therefore, an examination of widely-used textbooks is likely to indicate important strengths and weaknesses of standard high school courses. This ERIC Digest discusses four questions about widely-used high school government textbooks: (1) What are the distinctive characteristics of these textbooks? (2) What are the major weaknesses of high school government textbooks? (3) What are some criticisms of textbook treatments of the Constitution? (4) What are some recommendations for improving these textbooks?

What Are the Distinctive Characteristics of High School Government Textbooks? Publishers produce textbooks that fit national curriculum patterns. Consequently, they publish high school government textbooks for upper-level students, because in most states and school districts in the United States students must complete a course in American government to graduate from high school; and these courses tend to be offered to twelfth-grade students (Council of State Social Studies Specialists 1986).

Widely-used high school government textbooks from different publishers are remarkably similar in content, format, and style. Without exception, these books are large compendiums of information about institutions of American government, political processes, and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. They include principles of constitutional government in the United States, such as federalism, separation of powers, checks and balances, and representative democracy. The textbooks are "encyclopedic in scope and impressive in their comprehensiveness. They strive, with considerable success, to encompass the broad range of the history and operations of American government" (Carroll et al. 1987, v).

High school American government texts are designed for passive learning, transmission of facts and ideas rather than active involvement of learners in the pursuit of knowledge. Many themes, topics, and terms are mentioned, but few are developed in detail. The superficial survey of subject matter, rather than in-depth treatments of critical issues or core ideas, is the prevailing style of these books.

These textbooks tend to be visually appealing, filled with attractive pictures, graphs, and diagrams. The pages usually are colorful and engaging in format and design. Treatments of topics, by contrast, tend to be bland and uninteresting. Matter-of-fact presentations of content, which avoid or gloss over controversy, tend to fill the pretty pages of the high school government textbooks.

What Are the Major Weaknesses of High School Government Textbooks? A 1966 review of textbooks began with the statement that "the entire teaching profession is presently being assaulted by an avalanche of criticism particularly related to the quality of textbooks being used in schools" (Price 1966, 21). Common criticisms of high school government textbooks of the 1960s pertained to

- superficial and simplistic coverage of material;
- abstract or lifeless treatment of ideas and events;
- idealistic and unrealistic presentations of society;
- fragmentation of subject matter;
- avoidance of controversial topics or issues;
- emphasis on low-level cognition in questions and activities for learners;
- unattractive format and design;
- misrepresentation or avoidance of content about ethnic and racial minorities and women.

These common criticisms of the 1960s textbooks tend to be repeated in the 1980s with two exceptions. First, textbooks today tend to be rather attractive in format and design, especially in the use of graphics. Second, textbooks of the 1980s are likely to reflect the ethnic racial diversity and social pluralism of government and citizenship in the United States. However, some 1980s critics have judged current textbooks to be excessive in their emphasis on social pluralism and cultural diversity and deficient in treatments of national unity and the common good (Harrington 1980; Janowitz 1983, 91-105; Glazier & Ueda 1983, 57-64).

High school government textbooks were roundly criticized in a study sponsored by People for the American Way (Carroll et al. 1987). The reviewers faulted the books for lacking a sound sequence of topics and ideas, covering too much information, avoiding in-depth discussions of important ideas and events, glossing over or omitting controversial topics, failing to emphasize citizen participation in a democracy, and ignoring opportunities to develop students' capacities for criticism and creativity. The reviewers also blasted these textbooks for static and lifeless presentations of subject matter. They claimed that inherently interesting subjects—politics, applications of law to daily life, public issues, governmental decisions, citizen action in community affairs—were shorn of dynamism and drama by tedious and simplistic prose presented in rigid formats.

What Are Some Criticisms of Textbook Treatments of the Constitution? Valuable studies of textbook treatments of the U.S. Constitution were done in recognition of the Bicentennial of this document (Remy 1981 and 1987; Katz 1985).

Remy's studies revealed such common weaknesses as su-

John J. Patrick is director of the ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, director of the Social Studies Development Center, and a professor of education at Indiana University.

perficial treatments of landmark Supreme Court cases, failure to show how the Constitution influences or limits actions of government officials, and shallow discussions of core constitutional principles. Remy concluded that the texts were virtually devoid of detailed discussions of fundamental ideas, such as constitutional government, democracy, republicanism, and liberty under law.

Katz reported that the five high school government textbooks in his study included mostly "dry institutional descriptions" with only slight attention to political processes, ideas, and issues. Federalism, for example, was treated mainly as a set of legal relationships with scant attention to federal-state relationships and little discussion of the theory underlying this core principle of the Constitution.

A major criticism in the textbook review sponsored by People for the American Way was inadequate treatment of values in the Constitution. Furthermore, the reviewers faulted the textbooks for failure to examine issues in United States history associated with core values of the Constitution. The reviewers concluded that "the books do not sufficiently emphasize the values and processes that have emerged from this document to shape our society, such as due process and equal protection" (Carroll et al. 1987, vi).

What Are Some Recommendations for Improving High School Government Textbooks? Current reviews of high school government textbooks include several suggestions for improving the contents of these volumes. Four of these recommendations are listed below.

1. Emphasize fundamental concepts and values of constitutional democracy in the opening sections of a textbook and weave these core ideas throughout the remaining sections.
2. Highlight critical issues of our American constitutional democracy, which are associated with the operation of fundamental concepts and values in the lives of citizens in the past and present.
3. Use case studies to infuse vitality and drama into treatments of political and legal processes.
4. Develop processes and skills in critical thinking and decision making; challenge students to use these higher-order cognitive processes in their studies of fundamental concepts, values, and issues of our constitutional democracy.

References and ERIC Resources

The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are in the ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center) system and are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, write EDRS, 1900 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, VA 22304 or call 800-227-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number are annotated monthly in CIJE (*Current Index to Journals in Education*), which is available in most libraries. EJ documents are not available through EDRS; however, they can be located in the journal section of most libraries by using bibliographic information provided below.

Carroll, James D. et al. WE THE PEOPLE: A REVIEW OF U.S. GOVERNMENT AND CIVICS TEXTBOOKS. Washington, DC: People for the American Way, 1987. ED 288 761.

Council of State Social Studies Specialists. NATIONAL SURVEY: SOCIAL STUDIES EDUCATION, KINDERGARTEN-GRADE 12. Richmond, VA: Virginia Department of Education, 1986. ED 289 800.

Glazer, Nathan and Reed Ueda. ETHNIC GROUPS IN HISTORY TEXTBOOKS. Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1983. ED 232 941.

Harrington, Charles. "Textbooks and Political Socialization." TEACHING POLITICAL SCIENCE 7 (July 1980): 481-500. EJ 228 986.

Janowitz, Morris. THE RECONSTRUCTION OF PATRIOTISM: EDUCATION FOR CIVIC CONSCIOUSNESS. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

Katz, Ellis. "Federalism in Secondary School American History and Government Textbooks," in TEACHING ABOUT AMERICAN FEDERAL DEMOCRACY, edited by Stephen L. Schechter. Philadelphia: Center for the Study of Federalism at Temple University, 1984. ED 248 161.

Patrick, John J. and Sharryl Davis Hawke. "Curriculum Materials," in SOCIAL STUDIES IN THE 1980s: A REPORT OF PROJECT SPAN. Arlington, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1982. ED 221 449.

Price, Robert D. "Textbook Dilemma in the Social Studies." THE SOCIAL STUDIES 57 (January 1966): 21-23.

Remy, Richard C. "Treatment of the Constitution in Civics and Government Textbooks," in TEACHING ABOUT THE CONSTITUTION IN AMERICAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS, edited by Howard D. Mehlinger. Washington, DC: Project '87, American Historical Association & American Political Science Association, 1981. ED 279 580.

Remy, Richard C. "The Constitution in Citizen Education." SOCIAL EDUCATION 51 (September 1987): 331-336. EJ 343 086.

This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract No. RI88062009. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies or OERI or ED.